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Family Talk: Parents and children Involved with the Child Welfare and Children's Mental Health Systems (SUMMARY REPORT)

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SUMMARY

Families and Family and Children's Services

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The Study

Families who had been previously involved with services by two Family & Children's Service agencies (F&CS) in southern Ontario were asked to participate in a qualitative study, the purpose of which was to explore the experiences the families had in these child welfare systems. This report is the outcome of a qualitative grounded theory approach, the objective of which was to understand and give voice to the ideas and feelings that families conveyed to the researchers about their service experiences.

The Families

Within the F&CS agencies, eight mothers, four fathers and three children participated in the study. Five of the families had service from Agency A and three families had service from Agency B (Table 1).

Upon completion of the first round of analysis, three of the families were re-interviewed for clarification or elaboration of aspects of the original transcripts and to check on their perception of our preliminary coding ideas at the time.

Table 1 - Family Figures – F&CS

Participants	Agency A	Agency B
Mothers	5	3
Fathers	2	2
Children	2	1

The Grounded Theory Method

In order to make the research process transparent and to give the reader an opportunity to assess the methodology, we outline the approach used to interpret (analyse) the family interviews. Research assistants for the Partnerships for Children and Families Project

conducted the initial interviews. The initial broad questions asked of all families in the interviews were:

- What do the research participants want agencies to know about the service that was provided to them?
- How did the agency help?
- What changed as a result of the service?
- What were the characteristics of the workers participants most liked and most disliked?

After all interviews from all agencies were recorded and transcribed, the researchers began a process called *open coding*. In open coding, names are assigned to any group of words (phrases, sentences, paragraphs or groupings of these) in the transcripts that convey some relevance to our initial questions. Insofar as possible, coding utilized participants' own words in order to avoid distortion of their meanings. Where this was not possible or advisable, we sought a term that we thought most closely matched the participants' concept. We coded one interview at a time, adding new codes as they emerged. This process resulted in hundreds of independent codes.

Once all interviews were coded, we began the process of grouping similar codes within and across transcripts, creating categories that represent themes in the data. This process was repeated until the number of codes was reduced and codes were categorized meaningfully.

We often went back to the original quotes to ensure that the initial meanings were not lost in this process. Another way to keep a check on the fit between the participants' expressions and the researchers' interpretations is to consult with the initial family

participants in order to see if our evolving ideas reflect what they were saying. For this reason, the families were asked to read their transcripts and talk to us again about their transcripts and our developing interpretations. Three families were willing to do so.

The techniques of *bracketing* and *memoing* were also used to support the validity of our interpretations. Bracketing is a process whereby the researchers consciously set aside their own ideas of the phenomena being examined – in this instance, any preconceived ideas or value judgments of Family and Children's Service agencies and of the families that are serviced by them. When we became conscious of our own assumptions and impressions and wondered whether they might be biasing our perceptions of clients' comments, written memos articulated and recorded these thoughts. These memos were then included in the interpretive process.

In the final stage of this process, we began to look more expansively at what the data were saying to us. This stage is more interpretive, as relationships among the various categories are sought and examined and as themes emerge, a deeper understanding of the participants' meanings is developed. At the same time, it is crucial that the interpretation remain well grounded in the participants' own language and meanings; we therefore rely heavily on excerpts from the transcripts in reporting our findings.

The Findings

This report reflects our interpretation and understanding of what participant families conveyed in their interviews. We combined the findings of the two agencies, given their similar mandates.

It is important to place the results of Family and Children's Services in the context of the agencies' functions and accountability requirements. These agencies deliver mandated

services oriented primarily towards child protection. As a result, they are frequently experienced as intrusive and unwanted rather than as coming to the rescue. It would therefore be surprising to hear glowing stories about the services provided by child and family services. Even so, positive things do happen and the family participants in this study are able to identify and appreciate them, as noted in this participant's response.

> M[1]41: It's been rough. It's been depressing. It's been exasperating. But it's also been exciting, and it's also been thrilling, and for all of the ups, down, peaks, valleys, backs, forths, moments of clouded confusion -- when all is said and done, my involvement with Children's Aid for me, was a positive experience, and not one that I regret.

Like the other participants interviewed, this individual is able to discriminate between positive and negative experiences with F&CS, and the latter do not rule out appreciation of the former.

Table 2 highlights the overall experience families had while working with these agencies. It is interesting to note that most of the families did find some positive aspects in the service (seven out of eight families).

Table 2 - The F&CS Experience

Service had some positive aspects	7/8
Mainly Positive Experience	3/8
Generally not helpful	3/8
More Help needed	5/8

Two key organizing themes emerged from our data. It is around these themes that the report itself is organized. First, we find that participants' descriptions of what transpired and the way in which they experienced it are imbued with a sense of having been criminalized at each stage of the service process. Our participants' perceptions are that while many child

[1] Please note throughout that the letter M at the beginning of a quote represents a mother as speaker, F represents a father, C represents a child and Q represents a question or response from the interviewer. The numbers following these letters indicate our file numbers and are included in order to help readers distinguish among individual speakers.

protection workers intend to assess risk, what they actually do is make assumptions about risk and fault. When this happens, participants experienced it as a process that constructs them as bad parents (or "bad guys") and the process becomes a criminalizing one. We attempt to demonstrate and explain the dynamics of how this unfolds, based on our analysis of the data.

The second key theme is that despite the nature and structure of the child protection investigation process itself, different workers can intensify or ameliorate the sense of being criminalized (Table 2). We explore the nature of those differences -- from the perspective of the families who participated in our study -- how they operate in the interaction between worker and family, and how they influence the child protection process.

Feeling Criminalized

Below, we compare a neutral delineation of the child protection process with the way in which it emerged from our data.

Table 2 - The F&CS Experience – Two Perspectives

Risk Focused	Criminalizing
Report	Report/Accusation
Investigation	Investigation
Assessment	Judgment/Prejudgment
Intervention	Intervention/Coercion
Monitoring	Surveillance

In using the term "criminalized" we pick up on the participants' perceptions that they feel as if they are prejudged and found guilty, rather than heard and understood. In addition, participants feel as if they have been left forever marked or labelled in their own communities as bad parents. This affects their relationships within their community and the way in which they feel and behave as parents. The overall sense of having been criminalized by their involvement with F&CS is captured in the two quotes below. Although no participant

actually used the word "criminalizing" or "criminal," we give examples of how this theme emerges in the interviews.

> M113: And that's no way to raise a child, being afraid that every time you raise your voice, every time you put them in a corner, every time you send them to their room somebody is going to report you, you know.

> M33: You know, I'm even paranoid that if [Son] -- God forbid, he ever breaks a bone, -- um -- God forbid -- because I'm not going to want to take him to the hospital.

What are the some of the ways in which this "criminalizing" process – the process of becoming labelled or marked as a bad parent/person – evolves for the participants? Below, we go through the stages of the process, emphasizing those that were emphasized by the participants themselves. However, prior to describing the various stages of the process it is important to draw attention to an essential ingredient in determining the extent to which the criminalizing feeling comes into play for participants – the worker.

The Difference that Makes a Difference: The Worker's Attitude and Use of Power

Once the report has been made, how the family experiences the rest of the process has a great deal to do with the way in which the individual worker conducts him or herself in working with the family. This is very important, because however rigid and standardized the current Ontario child protection model may be, our participants are clearly saying that the process can be made more or less positive by the worker. This finding opens important possibilities for social work education, child welfare training and agency culture for fostering "the difference that makes a difference."

We distilled many codes referring to worker behaviours and characteristics into the two categories that seem to be most salient to the crucial difference that workers can make to how participants felt about the process. These categories are *worker attitude* and *worker use*

of power. While many different codes fit within *attitude* and *use of power*, generally *attitude* represents the participants' view that the worker is either positive, accepting and open in her/his views and ways of seeing the family, or she/he is disparaging, distant and patronizing. *Use of power* represents participants' views of how judiciously the worker wields the positional power inherent in her/his role and whether or not the worker is prejudging of participants. The ways in which both attitude and use of power are perceived by participants appear to determine whether the process is experienced as *depersonalizing* or *humanizing*. A depersonalizing approach is one that leaves the family member feeling that he or she has been treated impersonally, with disdain, or objectified, distanced.

> M74: And he treated us like we were the bad people and we were basically lowlifes.

A humanizing approach, on the other hand, is the concept we have used to name what participants described as being treated with respect, as if they were individuals with a point of view worthy of being heard and taken into account.

> M40: she was always very open to hear what we had to say and was ready and available to listen and she never ever, ever passed judgement which I thought was so awesome.

When we looked at the specifics of the verbal and non-verbal communication participants identified as conveying these two contrasting attitudes, we identified elements which can be understood as *differential use of self,* rather than simply personal attributes or skills alone. Use of self generally refers to the ways in which any human services worker's own values, beliefs, emotions, social skills, personality and social identity are brought into play in interactions with service recipients.

Use of power and *attitude* were often difficult to separate out in the analyses. For example, when a worker's attitude appears to be distancing or demeaning, an accompanying

hint of power misuse may be inferred. The quote below is an example of attitude and power appearing to overlap in such a way.

> M41: Well, no. I have the right to be treated as a decent human being. You have no right to come in here like Hitler, going, "Thou shalt do, and if you don't, you're going to be suffering major consequences." Sit down and talk to me as a human being. I'll work with you.

We have attempted as best we could to separate these notions out; however, there are necessarily areas of convergence.

Stage I: Report/Accusation

People can feel criminalized at the very outset by the fact that a report has been made by a third party or by the response of the agency to someone who self-reports. Participants' observations about the reporting phase focused on their feelings about the effects of anonymous mandatory reporting, instances where the reporter is known, and agency response to self-reporting. Anonymous reporting raised the issue of accountability: The callers are free to say whatever they wish without having to answer for it.

> M40: I had somebody call the children's aid saying that I beat [my child] and make her do all the chores and they came and had to investigate some of that. I was furious. I was infuriated that somebody would say something like that.

> F113: ... the Canadian service could learn from its American counterpart because you have the right to know your accuser and if, you know -- I think people would probably not make such stupid complaints if they knew their name was coming up as soon as the complaints were taken to the people.

When the individual making the report is known to the participant, there may be feelings of having been betrayed or maliciously accused.

> M47: ... I was called to come and pick him up and when I picked him up I said in front of the teacher that I am pounding your ass when I get home. I am so angry at you, right. So, she picked up the phone right away and phoned Family and Children Services.

Even self-reporting can expose a parent to feeling accused, labelled or punished, depending on the response they get.

> F107: But if you go to Children's Aid and say we need help – "No, no, you people are doing something wrong."

Stage II: Investigation

Attitude: Depersonalizing vs. Humanizing

The investigation stage is crucial as it can set the tone for the rest of the process. As we illustrate below, the attitude of the worker at this stage can help determine the degree of cooperation they might receive from family members. Our participants made it clear that a worker can have a depersonalizing effect on them or a humanizing one and that their response to the worker is greatly affected by which worker attitude they encounter. The quote below gives an example of one way in which a worker was experienced as having a depersonalizing effect:

> M41: "We think there's a concern here" -- and they come in. To automatically assume that I'm going to be belligerent, or negative, or what have you -- It's like -- Do not walk in with any preconceived conception of who we are. This attitude leads clients to feel less willing to cooperate.

In this quote we also find stated the concerning – though perhaps not surprising – possibility that workers may themselves produce some of the anger and resistance they encounter, when they approach family members in this way. Thus, any expectations of service recipient hostility would be realized.

Depersonalizing is also enacted when workers demonstrate a lack of interest in the lives of family members. It may be that interest in family members histories, needs and difficulties is considered outside the scope of child protection investigations - so that lack of interest is therefore not necessarily worker-generated distancing. The net effect, however, is

that this lack of interest has the effect of depersonalizing the family member, which negates the possibility of understanding her or him.

> M132: They didn't understand the background because they didn't probe. They didn't try.

It is possible for a worker to set a very different, humanizing, tone for the investigative stage, which our participants indicated elicits a different kind of response from them.

> M41: And, I'm more likely to be cooperative, from the beginning, if a worker comes in, like the second worker, and said, we've had this report come into our office. Now, there's been some concern, which is why I'm here. But I'd like to hear what, your part of the story. Where do you stand on this?

This participant goes on to describe the effect of this kind of approach on her own willingness to be forthcoming and cooperative.

Use of Power and Prejudgment

As noted previously, the way in which the worker uses power can also have a depersonalizing effect on the participants. The quote below illustrates one worker's use of her power in a way that left this father feeling intimidated and acutely aware of the worker being in a position to make life-altering decisions for him and his family.

> F40: She just came in angry, closed the door and she looks at me, opens it halfway and then she comes over, sits down, throws herself into the chair, throws her paperwork on the table -- All this intimidation. And I'm thinking, this is not gonna go good.

It should be said that the worker referred to in this quote arrived having been told that this father was abusive of his wife. The worker herself may have felt fearful, as a female confronting a possibly abusive male face to face, and may have intended to use her positional power to compensate in a self-protective way. This particular father capitulated in his own mind, but described his own resistant behaviour as a result of his perception that the worker had abused her power.

> M41: I've had a situation where a worker has come in with the assumption that what's been reported was concrete fact, and I'm guilty before I've been proven innocent. You know, like -- you're not innocent until you're proven guilty, you're guilty until you can prove you're innocent.

This quote also suggests how the participant, like others, links prejudgment with the process of being criminalized.

Stage III: Intervention/Coercion

The worker's attitude and use of power are also conveyed through the intervention phase, which some participants experienced as the coercive phase. Interventions were sometimes experienced quite positively, whether they were useful or not, and sometimes quite negatively. The best way we can categorize how participants described positive experiences of intervention is to say they were *strengthening*. Although *empowerment* is another possible way to think of it, because child welfare service recipients are, as a group, relatively disempowered, it seems inappropriate to use the concept of "empowerment" to talk about their experience. The negative way in which intervention was experienced – including coercion – was as *disempowering*.

Strengthening Experiences

Strengthening experiences included the following:

- *Concrete help.* This included information about or referral to resources, educational information about child development, help setting parenting priorities and dealing with specific difficult child behaviours.
- *Support provided.* The appreciation of support was expressed, among others, by this father, for whom support came as a surprise:

> F52: Just being there, somebody to talk to or anything like that. I never realized you can just phone them up to chat to them or anything like that. They're there for that.

- *Openness of Worker.* The positive feelings of participants and their willingness to reciprocate were greatly enhanced when they perceived workers as being honest and open.

> M40: And she was very open and honest and we felt, that's why we felt that we could be open and honest with her.

- *Worker was understanding and recognized need.* When workers assessed needs as well as risk, and reached out to help the family, participants told us they felt recognized and understood within their personal context.

> M41: Umm, I felt helped because they didn't just look at the situation as there's a problem with the child, the child's at risk. I finally got the right kind of workers who sat back and said, this family needs help.

The family's lives and difficulties were rendered visible in this way and it opened up the possibility for meaningful help to be offered.

- *Careful use of power.* The mother below offers an example of a worker's careful use of power:

> M52: She never overstepped her bounds, never accused me of anything, always gave me the benefit of the doubt to -- to say what I had to say before an accusation was -- you know, before any judgement.

In this example, being non-judgmental was understood by the mother to be an expression of respectful boundaries, hence respectful use of the worker's power. As we saw above, when the worker has not prejudged, the family member can see this demonstrated through an openness to him or her, which turn is experienced as a careful use of power.

Disempowering and Depersonalizing Practices

Some workers left participants feeling *depersonalized* or *disempowered* through the way that they dealt with them. Of course, structural issues such as child welfare legislation itself, administrative policies and practices contribute to depersonalization and

disempowerment. For example, one mother was concerned about a breach of confidentiality. In other forms of social work practice the breach she mentioned would constitute an unethical violation of confidentiality. Yet, under current F&CS legislation, the particular breach is condoned. Our focus here, however, will be on those elements -- structural or not -- that appear to be variable by the worker because that is what the participants identified. One form of depersonalization described by participants was distancing by the worker. In the quote below we can hear the extent to which the participant felt erased by the worker's attitude towards her.

> Q113: What about the way the workers interact with you? Is there anything that you would change or recommend?
>
> M113: At least pretend they're interested.

In the following quote, the worker is characterized regarding attitude and power in a way that we have called *being on a mission.*

> F40: She came out gangbusters, like she was gonna save the world in one minute and – uh-- that's all she had to do it in. And she attacked us.

The implications of *being on a mission* are complex and illuminating. The participant's perception is that the worker had constructed herself as a rescuer or good guy and has necessarily constructed a victim to rescue and a "bad guy" from whom to save the victim. The theme of feeling they had been constructed as bad guys or bad parents by the worker before the worker ever arrived made parents feel they had been erased as individuals, along with any good parent aspects of them.

The following quote serves to illustrate a number of other themes in our findings. It names a feeling of being dehumanized, being judged, criminalized, and disempowered. We

use it here to clarify the connection the participant makes between those experiences and the worker's use of power.

> F33: Well, what I'd like them to know is that people are human.
>
> M33: Yeah.
>
> F33: They make mistakes. And treat people as humans, not like somebody that broke the law and you're going to change the world. You know? That's - that's how some get on their high horse.

The following quote tells what happened when a mother reported to F&CS for alleged abuse became increasingly angry throughout the course of the investigative interview. The mother perceived that the worker came into the home hostile and closed to anything she had to say. The mother responded in turn with hostility, and things escalated to the point where she told the worker to leave and the worker refused.

> M41: "Well I can't leave because you're upset, you're gonna hurt your child." I'm not upset at my child, I'm upset at *you*. *You're* the one who's upsetting me, *you're* the one who's causing this stress, *you're* the one who's making everything continue and escalate! Just leave. "Well I can't leave; you're child's at risk." My child is not at risk, *you* are! Leave!

The mother saw the worker as being so committed to her construction of the mother as a bad parent that she thought the worker could not recognize what was going on between the two of them. It illustrates the production of anger and belligerence in the family member by a worker whose perceived attitude and behaviours contributed to this mother's feeling of being pre-judged and depersonalized.

Stage IV: Surveillance

At the stage of continued monitoring, participants described a number of things that contributed to a sense of having been criminalized, in addition to the length of time that agency surveillance continued. The data suggest that these concerns, while real -- regardless

of the way in which the process went -- are heightened when the process has been experienced as a criminalizing one. These included:

- *The long life of the record*;

> M33: Because like I said in my situation, if someone is to phone and say, well, could you do a check on her? -- Even though my file is closed, I may – I think that when it says it's closed, it's closed, rip it up, throw it out, goodbye – not keep somebody on a computer that isn't going through this anymore and shouldn't have to be put through it anymore because like I said people do change.

- *Constraints on family life and parenting in response to having become the object of others' scrutiny (community as well as agency);*

> M33: You know, that was in the contract, okay? And it was basically like -- we felt like pretty soon we're not going to be able to smoke cigarettes, we're not going to be able to go to the bathroom, we're not -- you know? And I'm just saying that, I mean -- Work with the people, don't -- you know.

- *A sense of vulnerability, fear and worry;*

> M113: And that's no way to raise a child, being afraid that every time you raise your voice, every time you put them in a corner, every time you send them to their room somebody is going to report you, you know. Like the other day at the mall she disappeared and I was afraid to yell for her because I was afraid that that person around the counter who had my name and everything, I was afraid she would call Children's Aid if I yelled at [my Daughter], you know. And I'm afraid of things like that and that's ridiculous. You should never be afraid to discipline your child.

- *And in the end...*

Some participants did not end up commenting on issues of surveillance. While they did not necessarily have a smooth process, they ended up feeling positive about the process in general – they felt humanized and they were able to see positive change in the lives.

> M52: ... and in the end of it, she's always the first one and only - the only person ever that's looked at me and said I can see that your love is unconditional for your kids. You know, I can see that you're strong enough to get through it.

C44: It was good.

M41: Two-way communication. That's what I found to be most beneficial. Honest communication and openness were met with honest communication and openness -- work got done. Changes were made, life got better.

Implications of F&CS findings for future research

Given the mandate of Family and Children's Services, it is unlikely that many families, particularly if they are involuntary, would welcome intervention. The threat is too great and the power vested in the social worker is too immense. However, it would appear from our participant families that the worker's ability to use power carefully and justly and to use him or herself in a way that conveys a caring and humanizing attitude goes a long way in making room for families to be more open to the service. We are not so naïve as to believe that the job of a social worker in F&CS is easy. In fact, we believe it may be one of the most difficult jobs a social worker can hold. It is easy to understand how a social worker could "burn out" after dealing with such intense situations for a long time, particularly given the nature of the work and the political and legal atmosphere currently surrounding child protection. We find ourselves, therefore, with several questions in relation to the workers experienced positively by family member research participants. Who are these workers? Are they new? Are they seasoned? What enables them to maintain these positive stances with families? Are they able to do this with all families? If not, what makes the difference? Do some workers have mainly positive relationships? Do some workers have mainly negative relationships? What are the personal and professional characteristics of a worker who is able to have mainly positive relationships? Are there family characteristics that make it easier for a worker to be positive and humanizing? The questions could go on. By focusing on these

questions in the future, we believe that much more could be learned that could benefit families, workers and the overall system.